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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING IMMEDIATE 2412
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA IMMEDIATE 0830
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE IMMEDIATE 2820
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE 2205
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE IMMEDIATE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000143

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN (GEHRENBECK)
DEPARTMENT FOR DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/07/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [KDEM](#) [KG](#)
SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN LEADERS FEAR PROPOSED GOVERNMENT
REGULATIONS

REF: 07 BISHKEK 946

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Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Minority Christian groups are concerned that changes proposed in a draft Law on Religious Freedom would restrict their ability to operate in Kyrgyzstan. Among the changes, the draft law would require each church to have 200 members to be eligible to register; current registration requirements set a minimum of ten members. The State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA) has defended the proposals as necessary to counter religious extremism. Leaders of minority Christian faiths have organized two roundtables with government officials and other religious groups to discuss the draft law and to offer alternatives. One church leader told us that while the proposed law would have to be approved by several parliamentary committees, he and other clerics were more immediately concerned about a draft presidential decree that included greater restrictions. Embassy will seek a meeting with new SARA head Kanybek Osmonaliyev to raise our concerns. End summary.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONCERNED OVER DRAFT LAW . . .

12. (C) During a January 23 meeting with Poloff, minority Christian pastors and religious leaders said that changes proposed in a draft Law on Religious Freedom would dramatically restrict their ability to operate in Kyrgyzstan. Although a draft law has been under discussion for nearly two years, the clerics believed that the draft would be completed soon and sent to parliament. Among the many changes, a church would be required to have at least 200 parishioners and 10 "founders," whose signatures would be required on all legal forms, in order to be registered; the current requirements are 10 parishioners and one founder. In addition, the law would require religious literature to be

approved by SARA prior to publication, prohibit using personal homes as places of worship, and restrict the option of alternatives to military service. Also, the pastors feared that all religious organizations that held Sunday school classes would have to register the courses with the Ministry of Education.

13. (C) Baptist leader Pastor Alexander Shumilin explained that the proposed changes would affect mainly smaller Christian churches, many of which have fewer than 200 parishioners and often meet in pastors' homes. (Note: The Russian Orthodox Church and Islam are recognized as "traditional" religions in Kyrgyzstan, but it is not clear whether they would be exempted from new registration requirements. End note.) Shumilin said that the leaders of Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, and other Christian churches had organized a roundtable on January 11 to discuss the draft law. Toigonbay Kalmatov, the then-head of SARA, and his deputy participated in the roundtable and, according to Shumilin, defended the draft law as needed to counter the threat of religious extremism. (Note: Kalmatov was replaced as the head of SARA January 29 by former Minister of Education Kanybek Osmonaliyev. End note.) Shumilin said that after lengthy discussions, the roundtable group drafted a resolution offering several alternative proposals that would prevent the spread of extremist activity while protecting citizens' rights to practice their faith.

. . . BUT ALARMED OVER DRAFT DECREE

14. (C) Shumilin said that following the January 11 roundtable, he was given a copy of a draft presidential decree that included many of the changes written in the draft Law on Religious Freedom, but was even more restrictive. The

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most significant difference between the law and the decree was the requirement that 200 fully participate in the registration process as "founders." Pastor Shumilin stated that only three of the more than seventy Baptist and Lutheran churches in Kyrgyzstan could meet the new criteria for registration. While several committees in parliament must approve the law before it reaches the president, Shumilin explained, the government sought to expedite the changes by drafting the decree, which could be enacted immediately.

15. (C) On February 1, a coalition of Protestant churches, led by Pastor Shumilin, held a second roundtable to discuss both the draft law and the draft decree. In addition to the church leaders, representatives of SARA, the State Committee on National Security, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Islamic Muftiate participated in the discussion. Church leaders focused their harsh criticism on the registration regulation, declaring that nearly all religious organizations would fall short of the threshold of two hundred founders. The SARA officials justified the changes by citing similar requirements in western countries. The deputy Mufti and experts from the Slavic University argued in support of SARA's position, stating that the religious community had changed dramatically since independence and that the government needed to re-establish control over the religious community to curb extremist activity.

COMMENT

16. (C) It does not come as a surprise that the current version of the draft Law on Religious Freedom contains new restrictions. In July 2007, Kalmatov said publicly that Kyrgyzstan needed "tougher" legislation to combat religious extremism and deal with unregistered religious organizations (reftel). In October 2007, Kalmatov told Poloff that the current minimum requirement of ten members for registration was too low, and he wanted all Muslim educational institutions to be registered with the Ministry of Education,

to allow for more government control and standardization of courses and lessons. While the government claims that the proposed restrictions are aimed at fighting religious "extremists," it is not clear whether existing congregations would be exempt from the new registration requirements, and a number of smaller churches may be negatively affected if the law is adopted in its current form.

17. (SBU) We will seek a meeting with the new head of SARA, Kanybek Osmonaliyev, whom we found to be reasonable as the Minister of Education, to raise our concerns. Embassy will also continue to meet regularly with Christian and other religious leaders and monitor developments on the draft law and decree.
YOVANOVITCH